Ministry of Agriculture

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
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Saskatchewan

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FCC DECLARES AG DAY IN JANUARY

Farm Credit Canada has declared January 23, 2008 "Ag Day in Canada." The federal Crown corporation, which lends money to farmers and assists them in acquiring land is offering producers a special seminar in approximately 100 communities where it has offices across the country.

"When it comes to producers across the nation, this is the time of year when our thoughts turn to the upcoming year," said FCC Senior Vice President of Marketing Lyndon Carlson. "Farm Credit Canada wants to be able to provide a vehicle for sharing very relevant and action-oriented information that relates to our customers' operations for the upcoming calendar year."

The result is the Ag Day seminars, which are being offered free of charge to producers in venues throughout the country, including 14 locations in Saskatchewan. Carlson said that the agenda for the day was created based on input from producers themselves.

"We have a Vision Panel composed of 8,000 farmers across Canada," he said. "This is the group we consult on new products, marketing, and what issues are keeping them awake at night. We've had over 3,000 of our customers reply to a survey in the past month, to get a little bit of the lay of the land in terms of the issues that they're facing, so we can make sure that our content is relevant. Then we talked to industry experts as another source. We have what we believe to be the best thinking on a number of issues."

Carlson stresses that, while the Ag Day activities are partly a celebration of the contribution farming makes to the economy, they have a strong practical orientation.

"We are successful when our customers are successful," said Carlson. "Often we stage an open house for coffee, but that doesn't help the farmer be more successful. We said, 'We can do better than that.'"

The seminars will present information on eight issues: commodity marketing, human resource management, alternative fuels, land values, farm safety, crop outlook, global marketing and the results of the FCC Vision Panel survey. The format is a video, which was put together by interviewing experts in the topic areas. The presentation is hosted by agriculture journalist Kevin Stewart. The video comes in regional editions, tailored to the specific needs of producers in different parts of Canada.

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In Saskatchewan, the FCC Ag Day in Canada events will be held in Assiniboia, Carlyle, Humboldt, Kindersley, Moose Jaw, North Battleford, Prince Albert, Regina, Rosetown, Saskatoon, Swift Current, Tisdale, Weyburn, and Yorkton. All the seminars will run from 1:00 to 3:30 p.m. on January 23. The specific locations are available from any FCC branch or through their website at www.fcc-fac.ca.

Lyndon Carlson said that the scheduling allows for networking time before the presentation and during an intermission in the video.

"There are challenges and opportunities in agriculture, and we believe that we can do more for our customers by sharing information and creating learning opportunities," said Carlson. "We intend this to be the first annual edition, and we hope to do it every year in January."

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BORDER OPENING PROMPTS OPTIMISM FOR SASKATCHEWAN BISON INDUSTRY

The recent re-opening of the American border is putting upward pressure on bison prices and a smile on the faces of bison producers'.

Saskatchewan Bison Association president Mark Silzer said the price increase was almost immediate.

"We had our national sale a day after the scheduled opening of the border. There were some American buyers up, and that saw the first breeding stock animals cross the border in years. Prices at the sale were up 20 per cent over the previous sale a year ago," said Silzer, who is also the Canadian Bison Association president.

Like the cattle industry, Silzer said the border closure had been taking its toll on the bison industry.

"I think that, ever since BSE, Canadian prices have lagged behind the U.S., both in finished animals and feeder stock. I think, with the border open, we are going to start to see Canadian prices come up and be more in line with U.S. prices," said Silzer.

The national bison sale was held at Canadian Western Agribition. Seven of the 32 animals that went on sale were bought by Americans, with two-year-old bulls averaging $2,442 – a 22.4-per-cent increase over 2006.

Silzer is cautiously optimistic that the upward trend will continue.

"It's hard to say. Meat prices have trended up over the past three or four years in Canada and the U.S., but Canada has lagged behind. There has been a significant investment in the marketing of bison meat over the last number of years, and we are finding ourselves approaching a situation where we are going to have to ration bison meat because we just don't have enough. That will see finish prices go higher. As those prices go up, I think you are going to see higher prices in breeder stock as well," said Silzer.

Price increases are not the only implication of an open border. It also affects the genetic diversity of the North American herd.

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"There's been a lot of American producers who would have liked to access genetics out of Canada. The bison herd in North America is only 500,000 head, and there is a need for producers to access genetics from both sides of the border," explained Silzer.

However, Silzer points out there are some challenges for the bison industry.

"I think our producers are being affected the same way that beef and pork producers are by the higher dollar – that is causing some concern and affecting prices for producers – and I think the other thing is the cost of feed. With grains and oilseeds up, we have seen feed prices rise dramatically, and certainly that is having a negative impact on our producers," said Silzer.

But Silzer points out that, on the whole, the industry is cautiously optimistic.

"I think prices will move up and fall in line with prices south of the line, and I think that, when you look at the supply/demand situation, it looks like this industry is poised to be looking at some pretty good times over the next couple of years," said Silzer.

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RAISING SHEEP THE NEW ZEALAND WAY

You might think there is a not a lot in common between New Zealand and Saskatchewan. For starters, there is no such thing as "winter" as we know it in New Zealand.

However, Colleen Sawyer with the Saskatchewan Sheep Development Board points out there is a lot Saskatchewan sheep producers can learn from their Kiwi counterparts. Sawyer said that knowledge will be showcased later this month at two conferences called "Raising Sheep the New Zealand Way in Canada."

"Well, the New Zealand way is different from us in a number of ways. One obvious example is that they have no winter. However, there are a number of New Zealand concepts, of lambing for example, that you can bring to Canada even with our winter this way," said Sawyer.

Mark Ritchie raises his sheep the New Zealand way. The producer from Amherst Island, Ontario, will be one of the speakers.

"Mark has a large flock of over 1,000 ewes and has worked in New Zealand and Britain, so he has a large base of knowledge of how they raise sheep in those areas. It's funny, but 1,200 animals would be a small flock in New Zealand. We call that a large flock here," said Sawyer.

The Saskatchewan Sheep Development Board is encouraging the province's 1,100 sheep producers to increase the size of their flocks.

"It doesn't take much more to run a larger flock when it comes to handling equipment, fencing and watering facilities, for example. Frankly, the pay-off is greater when you have a large flock. Certainly, though, you need to talk to people to learn about the techniques you need to be a large flock owner," explains Sawyer.

That is where the two workshops come in. The first will be held Friday, January 25, in Saskatoon at the Heritage Inn. The same workshop will be held Saturday, January 26, in Moose Jaw at the Knights of Columbus Hall.

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Registration begins at 9:30 both days, and the cost is $40 per person or $75 per couple and includes lunch.

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FACT SHEET ON REVEGETATING SALINE SOILS NOW AVAILABLE

A new fact sheet put out by the Saskatchewan Forage Council (SFC) will help producers return land with saline soil to greater productive capacity by using grasses.

Saline soils are those which contain sufficient soluble salts to impair productivity. In Saskatchewan, saline soils are generally rich in sulphate salts, existing as compounds of sodium, magnesium and calcium.

Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) estimates that about 5.52 million acres of agricultural land in the province are at moderate to high risk of salinization. Depending on the level and type of salt present in the soil, the impact on crops can range from minor yield reductions to establishment failure.

Given those factors, SFC Executive Director Janice Bruynooghe said the fact sheet, entitled "Revegetation of Saline Soils Using Salt-Tolerant Grasses," serves an important purpose.

"We've got some pretty vast acres in parts of Saskatchewan which have saline soils with sufficient soluble salts to impair productivity. Sometimes it's not an entire quarter-section that is affected, but smaller chunks and pieces here and there," said Bruynooghe. "Producers struggle with these areas, getting them seeded down and being productive."

However, the good news for producers is that moderately to severely saline soils can be reclaimed using salt-tolerant perennial grasses. In fact, new grasses have recently been developed that have improved salt tolerance, yield and quality compared to grass species traditionally used for saline soil reclamation.

"If we can get those areas established, forages can work to mitigate some of the salinity within the soil," Bruynooghe said. "The land can be reclaimed, while at the same time providing a forage crop that can yield a financial return for the producer from land that might otherwise be unproductive."

The fact sheet gives an overview of soil salinity and the problems it poses for plant growth. It provides a comprehensive rating of grasses that are commonly grown in Saskatchewan, highlighting their relative salinity tolerance, growth and production characteristics, and resulting forage quality. It also contains management considerations for producers to bear in mind when using grasses for saline soil reclamation.

"It's an excellent summary of some of the challenges and the resources available that producers might look at using," Bruynooghe said.

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Funding for the publication was provided through AAFC's Greencover Canada Program. Project partners included AAFC, Saskatchewan Agriculture and the SFC.

Copies of "Revegetation of Saline Soils Using Salt Tolerant Grasses" are available online at www.saskforage.ca, or by calling the SFC office at (306) 966-2148.

The SFC was formed as a co-operative in 1987 to enhance the province's forage industry in terms of production, harvesting, utilization and marketing. It plays a role in communicating information to producers and others in the industry, dealing with government on production issues and marketing policies, and assisting in the identification and prioritization of important research.

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2008 SASKATCHEWAN CATTLE FEEDERS ASSOCIATION ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING AND CONVENTION

New Perspectives - Competing in the New Marketplace is the theme for the Saskatchewan Cattle Feeders Association (SCFA) convention being held on January 24 and 25 at the Saskatoon Inn Hotel and Convention Centre.

Susan Echlin, General Manager of SCFA, extends an invitation to all cattle producers to attend this excellent event.

"We have some great speakers lined up, and they each bring a unique and important perspective to the problems facing the industry," she said. "From looking at how auditing can increase your competitiveness, to consumer and media considerations and United States agriculture policy, attendees will walk away from the conference with the information they need to move forward."

Of particular interest will be Dennis McGivern, Vice-President of Informa Economics Inc. of Memphis, Tennessee, who will be talking about the proposed U.S. legislation regarding implementation of mandatory Country of Origin Labelling (COOL) for agricultural commodities.

In addition to the conference presentations, this event provides additional benefits to those in attendance. "It is also an important networking opportunity for producers, suppliers and others involved in the cattle industry. We have a great tradeshow, the eleventh annual Merial auctioneering competition, the Cattle Feeder of the Year Award that recognizes a SCFA member for their outstanding contribution to the industry, and, as always, some great entertainment," Echlin noted.

2007 was a very challenging year for all livestock producers according to Grant Zalinko, Beef Consultant - Feedlots with Saskatchewan Agriculture. "Higher feed grain costs, competitiveness issues with Canadian beef processors and the higher value of the Canadian dollar relative to the United States currency negatively affected the Canadian cattle feeding industry. Uncertainty and volatility describe the outlook for 2008, and the upcoming convention provides cattle feeders the opportunity to hear from industry experts on topics that directly affect their industry," he explained.

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The conference brochure can be downloaded from the homepage of the SCFA at www.saskcattle.com.

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